

Women's Lives

**Poems
by**

Ann Struthers

The Struthers Family
Cedar Rapids, IA

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Mari Dittmer, Charity Struthers, Georgia Struthers, John Struthers

Introduction

Eleanor Ann Struthers, Ph.D. (1930-2024), an author, teacher, wife, and mother of four, was an energetic and enthusiastic lover of life. Born and educated in Iowa, she lived most of her life there, completing degrees at Morningside College and the University of Iowa. During the second half of her teaching career, she offered courses in American and Middle Eastern Literature and in creative writing at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, IA. Though based in Iowa, with her husband, Melvin, she travelled widely in the North America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, twice teaching abroad as a Fulbright Professor in Syria and Sri Lanka.

At her death on 24 February 2024 she left many typescripts of poems, published and unpublished, that were never collected in a published volume. As her close friend for many years, I agreed with her children to attempt completing several of her collections for some form of publication that would make her work more accessible.

Ann Struthers left two main unpublished collections of poems centering on women's lives. On her computer hard drive, *Yeast* was last saved in 2018, and *Women of Persia, Iowa* in 2017. I have constructed a collection of these poems, using *Yeast*, the largest, as a basis. To this I have added other relevant poems from her files. As with the other categories I have used to group her poems, this one has blurred edges. A number of the poems here, especially from *Yeast*, appear in her other collections, and those collections sometimes contain a few poems that could as easily be here.

In "Memories of Aleppo" in her collection, *My Aleppo*, Struthers recalled her childhood in the 1930s and 1940s in a very conservative northwest Iowa farming community. Her earliest sense of herself was as wanting to expand her inner life — to know and understand the world around her — and before long to know the worlds beyond her community. This desire determined what would become the passions of her inner life: reading and writing and, eventually, teaching, for her the keys to knowing her world and to sharing what she found most compelling as she grew. Her desire and her passions were not particularly welcome in her family and in her community, which fairly rigidly prescribed women's roles. Intellectual women did not fit in, for they were not useful except as school teachers during the short period between finishing high school and marriage.

Struthers's rebellion against the gender ideology of her community came naturally, and the history of her inner life was marked by the events that led to her career as author and college professor: completing her B.A. despite her family's unwillingness to finance her education, marriage to a man who supported her ambitions, gaining advanced degrees when university faculty were all male and rarely supportive, serving in faculty positions where her abilities and achievements often were not valued. It is no surprise then that much of her writing explores the lives of women. In her memoir of Syria, she devotes many pages to her observations about women's experience in the rigidly oppressive patriarchies of the Middle East. The poems in this collection mainly concern the lives of women closer to home, in the usually less controlling, but still continuously oppressive patriarchies in the United States and the West.

Struthers kept spotty records of her journal publications. Notes about publishing she left on typescripts are included here. Also included are dates when she last saved files of digital manuscripts.

Terry Heller
Coe College 2026

Yeast

2018

To Our Mothers

Someone, I tell you, will remember us.
Sappho

We think of you, dear, dead women who sleep
in narrow beds, who do not hear or speak
of your suffering and your pain, who keep
silence. Clara Barton, who proved the weak
were not women, strong amidst screams, stench,
squalor of field hospitals. The unseen
hundreds burned at Martyrs' stakes for witches.
The agony of Mary Magdalene
when Christ was nailed upon the cross to die.
Your fight's not won — the awful smell of war
still spews over earth; superstition cries;
Pontius Pilot lives, but we wear your scars
like bright badges, your beliefs like gold crowns;
hold your names holy till the last star drowns.

Crazy Quilt

The grandmothers knew the right word
for it: This is a crazy quilt,
fabric scraps that document life's insanity,
put together with feather stitches.
Here's your wedding dress.
You were crazy in love — ran away
— and got married before a justice of peace
—
that night you danced demented, threw your
flowers
to Imogene Bloom, schizophrenic, and Joan
of Arc
caught them. Here's black from the mourning
suit
when father died, out of his head and raving.
Here's the practical blue serge you bought
when you wanted red satin. Now that's crazy!
Here's the baby's green velvet coat;
she rolled over and over, out of her mind with
delight,
playing in her first snow.
Here's the scraps begged from the neighbor
who didn't make quilts — her secret madness
—
dresses of wine brocade and flowered silk
she never wore.
From the curve of a sleeve, the dart of a
bodice,
you assemble a collage of snippets, random
scraps,
and piece together a life from happenstance,
circumstance, coincidence. You are a
pattern-making
woman, trying to make sense of the
senseless,
and you arrange scarlet, emerald, fuchsia,
cobalt,
stitch a cover hiding the marriage bed's
secrets
to keep someone warm through long winter
nights
that are silver-white, inexplicable.

Grandma's Button Box

Abstraction on Spectrum (Organization, 5)
oil on canvas by Stanton MacDonald-Wright

Grandma's steel hair, twisted into a steely
knot,
metal hairpins jabbed into it.
Her fingers strong, hard
as iron clothes pins, her metallic
smile displays a gold front tooth.
In her house there is nothing beautiful,
everything plain, useful, worn;
the iron trivet says Sensible.
Dark brown rugs won't show dirt,
dark brown covers drape parlor furniture.
Except an old shoe box
full of buttons: Cherry red, pumpkin orange,
ocher, tangerine, salmon pink, brick dust red,
persimmon, mauve, violet, Concord grape
purple.
The child could spill these colors, sift these
fanciful
shapes through her hands, watch sunlight
transform them,
turning the Holstein-milk white to bluing white,
melting the burgundy into rose, transforming
brass rounds
into little suns.
The sound of their frivolous voices,
gossiping as she stirred them, the clatter
and click of them like the busybody sounds
in the hen house. The variety of shapes and
thicknesses,
and most of all the colors, chalk white, cloud
white,
pearl pink, lead blue, satin doll blue, pine
green,
Irish green, apple green, chartreuse, the very
word
wrinkling with the crackle of taffeta.
They told her all the drabness in the world
could not overcome them.

Mother's Snapshot of Lindberg

The blurred young man in the snapshot
rides in a convertible, slow,
but too fast for Mother's 1927 Box Brownie
to capture his features clearly.
It's the Minneapolis parade
where she stood on the curb from six a.m.,
waiting for the blond flyer, braver than wise,
who does not know his son, yet to be born,
will be smothered by kidnappers.
It is only a year before she marries,
goes back to Long Prairie,
to mud roads, mortgaged farm,
her dirt-poor family next door,
mother-in-law who disapproves,
the boy born early
who stopped breathing in the night
for no known reason.
Whatever Lindberg tells his other children,
I know they, too, found tears
spilling like broken strings of pearls
for their unknown brother.
My green-eyed mother tells us later children,
waving her thin arm to include
the cloud-clotted horizon, rocky soil,
thin grass of Dakota, that here is paradise.
I and my sisters try to call him back to her,
but the wind sucks away our breath,
shushes our voices against the enormous
distance.

Mother's Postage Stamp Quilt

Anna Smith Mohr 1907-1975

After she finished the flower garden quilt
she dared to use some of the money she
saved
from selling eggs to buy a little fabric
for accents on her next one.
Scraps from her everyday sewing made
the most blocks, but around the mosaic,
geometric shape of the center the purchased
colors
splashed like sunset, peachglow, embers,
burnt orange merging into night
at the black sateen around the border.
Like ladders or lightning bolts
the blazing and dark one-inch-square blocks
set off the bottle blues from her aprons,
the red-check from the twins' dresses,
apple green from the lining of a skirt,
Mrs. Hilmer's shell-pink scraps. Aunt Stena's
turquoise prints. In a house without
any pictures, this was her picture,
her quilting stitches as tiny as secrets,
pattern on pattern which only the knowing eye
could see.

Chicken Dinner

My farm-wife mother kept an axe cleft
in the chopping block. She'd take her hook,
capture some naive rooster's foot, grab him
by his legs and carry him upside down
towards his execution while he squawks,
twists, and beats his wings, trying to peck
the hand that held him. Whack! the
feathered head
lies still — its red crown and wattles, yellow
beak,
bright black eye still staring on the stained
wood.
She lets the body go. It cartwheels, paints
the weeds vermillion from its severed neck.
Then she plunges the limp carcass into
a pail of boiling water to loosen
the feathers, pulls them off, spills them
on the wind. Inside the house
she flames paper in the black cook stove,
singes the naked body, burns away
pin feathers. Scrubs it clean
with a brown brush. Beneath the breast bone
cuts through the flesh, yanks out
the blue intestines, throws
away the craw, slices the gizzard,
strips its bitter yellow lining.
Tears the liver and heart from their pockets,
roasts in a 350 degree oven.
Done when the men come in from the fields
at noon. She stirs gravy, mashes
potatoes. After all that hard work,
her smile is as sweet as milk.

Rag Rugs

Every time I visit mother, my children in tow,
she's working on a new rag rug,
dreaming of future ones, braiding them
the way she used to braid her daughter's hair.
She's covered her floors with them —
now gives them away,
but still she keeps working.
"See this dark purple," she says,
handing me a ball of woolen strips,
"If I get the right fabrics to go with it...."
She's intense, consumed by concerns
of pattern, size, shape,
the arrangement of colors
and textures, making something
from nothing. I don't know what
she's trying to forget.
She surveys our clothes minutely,
pinches the fabric between her thumb
and fingers to feel it, says,
"Marcie's coat would look good
with these reds and browns."
She bites off a thread and stares at my
slacks.
"I get such nice long strips from pants."
She lifts her scissors, puts them back
reluctantly.
Oh, mother, wanting parts
of me and mine, I who early claimed
so many pieces of you, woven into
the braid of my life, colors light
and dark, some frayed, some fading,
some that wear like iron.

Old Aunts

Forced back to their last holding,
they barricade their territory: Dying.
Male doctors have wrenched the profession
of birthing from them, but they
give up to no one this remaining province.
Women of no beauty, no distinction,
no power, the old aunts wait in the hospital
room,
detect minute changes in the flutter
of my mother's eyelids, hear small differences
in her labored breath.
Ladies who supervise miles of quivers and
gasps,
continents of final confessions,
oceans of regret, galaxies of compassion,
Aunt Freda, Sophia, Carrie,
your arthritic hands, thick and gnarled,
smooth away the hair from her sunken face,
wipe her incontinent mouth,
hold her fingers while she departs, bit by bit,
a white shadow, drifting toward the unmapped
boundary.

Last Winter's Snow

Where is the girl of dimity gowns,
a white wraith behind the parlor screen,
who dared to love Judge Lord, the renowned
friend of her father? Wrote that her brain
like skeins of yarn became a snagged snarl
after his sudden death. Three times failed?
And Anne Sexton, who gave up this world?
Sylvia, gone from pain and betrayal?
And where is last winter's snow?
Elizabeth Barrett, run-away from her father
with Robert, escaping the tyrant?
The red-haired queen who sentenced Sir
Walter
to the tower? And Cleo who secretly sent
for wriggling death when Antony lost
and Caesar was measuring her chains?
Oh where are the beautiful, the best
talkers, the charmers, bountiful minds?
And where is last winter's snow?
And where is Charlotte, Emily, Anne,
the talented sisters of the moors?
And George Sand who nursed dying Chopin?
And Jane at Lyme, whose true pen records
romance of the country heroine?
And Mary Shelly with Frankenstein?
Where are you, Mother, not writer, queen,
but dearer still, gone with winter's wind?
And where is last winter's snow?

Potato Patch

I remember mother carrying
her battered galvanized pail,
faded red stripe below its rim,
making her way carefully
down the path, around the brittle weeds,
to the potato patch where the digging fork
stood upright, a skinny, rusty sentinel.
She set her foot and lifted the black soil,
exposed the nest of Round Reds.
Shaking off the dirt, she kept the big ones
and even the little ones, small as marbles
or little moons.
I imagine her now,
still going out to the garden,
picking a pathway through the stars.

Cherry Trees

I remember watching Grandfather
grafting stems of Oxheart, exotic fruit
onto wild roots, a skill he learned
in the old country. Everyone said
I took after him, and I believed it.
One spring when the cherry trees
bloomed white lace, held a million bees
in their filmy hair, Mother, looking at them,
cried. She wouldn't say why, only wiped her
eyes
on her apron and went back to the kitchen.
Years later now, Grandfather, Mother gone,
and someone else leaving.
I see those perfumey, blossomy veils
and weep. Inside my ribs
Oxheart is small, hard, black-red,
gnawed like the pit of a cherry.

At Cousin Wilma's Place

Cousin Wilma hums the old songs,
keeps cats who come and go
like light and shadow, like good days
and bad, the way Wilma's arthritis
fluctuates. Still, she hobbles out
to her flower beds, pulls weeds
with her knotted fingers where sun and shade
keep her garden growing. Patience is her
style,
slow tunes and sweet.
She knows that all gardens are hope
resting on a trembling leaf, summer
depending
on a slight pink bud. The tulip bulbs eaten
by ground squirrels are hope transferred.
She sighs.

Clouds like delicate petals
drift random — no pattern. Her gardens
march in straight rows, but above is chaos
where cherry blossoms fall glissando,
cover her hair — underfoot, they refuse order,
thousands of them, scattered for a bride.
Silks pleated, shirred, rushed — satins,
smooth,
or embroidered with pearls — fiddles playing
the dance tunes, "Pretty Red Wing,"
"After the Ball is Over." The wind moves
like a dancer. Even her apron swirls
a little now.

The cats come with her, stepping lightly
among Wilma's Bright Eyes Phlox, under
Shasta Daisies, around Dwarf Gaillardia,
clustered Bellflowers almost as dark
and silky as Jet and Smokey Joe,
their paw prints beside the Blue
Belladonna Delphinium, on flowers
beaten down by rain, broken
Bleeding Hearts and Hollyhocks twisted
by the wind, red rose petals eaten
by hail's white teeth — it's all iffy, she knows.

Music in snatches, "Waiting for the Robert E.
Lee,"
waiting a long time and the ball is too soon
over,
high-heeled red shoes slumped in the back of
the closet,
poppies blowing their red heads,
black centers dusted with morphine dreams.
Oh, pretty Red Wing, it's a long way across
the dance floor, across the carefully mowed
lawn

to the prim white house where she lives
with Delbert. He sees clouds as faucets
that turn on for his deserving, watches them,
the barometers
of grain markets in Chicago, thinks they
speak to him
in the same language as his rain gauge.
Horsetail clouds and dreams of rain
falling warm on her bare shoulders,
rose hips, paper-thin Chinese Lanterns,
Money-Penny with its translucent coins
and dry stems. Silent music plays
grace notes, what life does not give anyone.
She knows she's the best gardener in the
whole county,
her trowel biting into despair.

Beulah's Pain

Cousin Beulah in the nursing home
twitches in her narrow berth.
She is slight as a bird now, her tears
heavier than her hands.
Pain carries her on its own train,
swift across prairies, slow up mountains,
through narrow tunnels, around curves
where she can watch its tail move
as if drawn by another engine.
It never arrives — switches
continually back and forth
up and down. She won't get off,
clings to the handrails,
clutches pneumatic door's handles
as she sways from coach to coach, searches
for an easy chair in the parlor car,
or gazes out the window
for a view of the dunes along the shore,
the glass dome of the station

Vivian at the Gypsy's Amusement Park

Vivian's white hair shines in the light
from the lamp on the table's lace cloth.
Smoke from Madam Rose's cigarette
swims above them like thin ghost pickerel.
Autumn wind bells the fortune teller's tent.
She reads Vivian's cards, tells her not to sell
her little house and buy a trailer
next to her friend's. "You don't like
your friend's sons, those mean boys."
She examines Vivian's palm, her index finger
tracing the lifeline. "Big break here,"
she says. "You're in the hospital a long time.
But you'll get better."
All of this came true, just as Vivian knew
it would. The two mean sons quarreled
over Estella's money. Got it away from her.
Vivian went to University Hospital
for a triple by-pass and recovered,
better than ever.
Next spring Rose isn't working,
just hanging around watching her sons run
the weight-guessing booth, the ring-the-bell-
with-a-mallet concession. Keeps her dark
eyes on the girls taking tickets
at the merry-go-round and bumper cars.
"I've been sick," Rose says. "Telling fortunes
takes too much out of me now."
Vivian holds Rose's hand and feels cancer
growing. Vivian says, "You'll soon feel better
soon."
The carousel music pumps brightly.
Rose can't answer.
Finally she says, "Look at you,"
eighty-three and still foxy."

Treasure

Vivian and I sit on the porch, watch
the thundershower rub the lake's waves
the wrong way; they come in foam-lipped,
sputtering against the beach,
carry away the children's sand buckets
in retribution.
Black clouds skid toward the horizon.
The pale sun peers out again,
pulling a rainbow with it;
the left arch dips into the water
at the end of the dock.
Vivian, eighty-three years old,
strolls out across the lawn,
the wet sand, onto the dock's grey planks.
I wait there in the wicker rocker
watching the colors intensify.
She walks through the violet;
it wraps her in its shawl.
At the edge she scrutinizes the troubled
waters,
gazes down into their depths, just in case.

Vivian at Eighty-Six

"I've been polite for eighty-six years,"
Vivian chirps in her cracked voice.
"Now I'm cutting loose."
When Marvin Schneider
pushes ahead of her
at the grocery check-out line, she tells him
he's bad-tempered, has bad breath,
and that she remembers when he was in first
grade
and peed his pants every day.
When her daughter sends the Lutheran
minister
to see her, she tells him to go to hell,
which flusters him considerably.
She writes letters to all her old bosses,
insists on taking them to the cemetery
putting them on their graves. I tell her
dead men can't read but she says her words
will sink right through the dirt,
through their coffins, burn into their eyes,
the old dunderheads, the old pricks.
She sits on the balcony railing at Priscilla's.
dangles her frail legs over the side and says
she can fly but that she won't do it
while we're looking. Oh, Vivian,
grasp the rigging of reality, sail back
to Spirit Lake if you can. It's okay
to say that you would never have married
Archie
except that you were pregnant,
didn't grieve when he died
forty years later, that you lied
about your age, died your hair,
took too many tranquilizers.
It's okay to call Herbert Fossback an old fart.

Vivian in Vino Veritas

A pariah to his neighbors,
Uncle Ken loved dandelions, cultivated them
in his yard in Iowa Falls, plucked the
blossoms
at midday when their rays had spread fully
open.
Then after his alchemy turned gold into wine,
he poured it into old bottles he had scrubbed,
then laid them lovingly on their sides in his
cellar.
A friend gave him an antique key
that said "In vino veritas," and he asked me
what it meant. He always wanted to give me
several bottles, although I tried to decline the
syrupy brew.
But he insisted, so there was no way to leave
them behind.
I was going to empty them down the drain,
but Vivian, who was 84, was more practical.
"We'll cut it with sour lemon,"
she said, and we sat on her patio
under the oak tree where the wrens had a
nest
and talked about all the relatives.

Cleaning Out Vivian's Basement

I am helping Vivian clear out her basement.
She's lived in this house 60 years, saved
everything.
Her fruit room shelves are lined
with empty, carefully washed Miracle Whip
jars.
She saved the burned out toaster,
two broken chairs, raveled rugs,
gew-gaws and knick-knacks,
clothes that haven't fit for twenty years,
bank statements from 1939 onward.
From her years of sewing
she's stored boxes and boxes of scraps,
mostly polyester from the pants and over
blouses
she made for herself. She loves polyester.
"Maybe the Lutheran ladies would make quilts
with them," she says wistfully.
We both want to save what isn't here,
what glows faintly now in the basement's half
light.
But we are ruthless, tossing away the long
past.
Vivian fingers the fabrics lovingly.
"This is the outfit I wore
to the Legion Club's Christmas party
the last year Archie was alive."

Lot's Wife

The truth was, I didn't want to leave
my house, small, neat, the fireplace
outside the door with a flue that finally
drew! And my loom! I could have dismantled
it and tied it onto a camel, but you know
how those beasts are, always rubbing up
against
something, trying to lighten their load.
I was afraid they'd be suspicious, but I left it.
It would have been kindling before we arrived
at where ever he was going — even he didn't
know
where or how long, or how many murderous
bandits
along the way. I'm old. I've worked hard.
Raised
all those children who are elated for
adventure.
All I want is my garden, my house, my
weaving,
a little peace and quiet. So I looked back
and that night, before we were out of sight of
Ur,
I left them, made my way home.
When they couldn't find me, they made up
this story
about the pillar of salt, but it wasn't me.
I was home, cooking a pot of lentils, carding
wool,
puttering around in the blessed silence.

The Tomb of Queen Sub-ad of Ur

Queen Shub-ad of Ur
had to die when her husband died
to honor him properly.
When they carried her into her tomb
above the dead King's, her ladies
crouched around her bed.
The queen, shrouded in beads of gold,
lapis lazuli, carnelian, wore gold chaplets,
the five-flowered hair-pin of a queen,
a beaten gold hair ribbon over her elaborate
wig,
her extra wig on a shelf beside her.
The keeper of the wardrobe
lay beside the cedar chest of dresses.
In an adjoining chamber the grooms stood
beside the red and gold painted chariot,
the two asses that pulled it.
In the center of the room, the bowl of sweet
poison,
the small cup beside each body.
They could hear clods thumping
on the roof, as the grave was filled in,
tramped down. The little musician
pulled songs from the harp
until the last attendant slumped,
songs for the blue sky of Ur, the yellow brick
palace
baked in the sun, a quick glissando, a few
plucks
for laughter, a small love song for the soldier
away at the war. Then she, too, drank, fell
forward,
her fingers still poised on the strings.
The earth carries the music's vibrations
around the globe again and again. Those
who hear it
tremble. And somewhere down the long
corridors
of death, all the rooms of the graves meet.

Floating at Carthage

I wander among the foundations
of little houses, floors of *terrace*,
some still intact, one with black and red
Greek borders, find
the forum, the baths,
the present President's compound on cliffs
above them, so I must not point
my cameras in that direction.
I see enough of toppled pillars,
pause at the cafe and sip our sodas,
among the fallen, fluted marbles.
I think of the woman who lived
in that little house, who put yogurt to set
in the evening, in the morning cooked flat
bread
on a heated stone beside the doorway,
washed
olives and grapes for the children,
and looked out at the sea below,
waves coming in languidly,
bearing the boats of the Roman army,
floating innocent as leaves
on the turquoise water.

Blue Fabrics

Cotton-Goods Land, Woodcut by Hiroshige

Two geisha, holding their kimonos at a rakish
angle,
their faces pointing one direction, their clogs
another,
tipsy from drinking with their samisen clients;
their maid follows, her eyebrow lifted in
concern.
The cotton shop they pass holds two
merchants seated
before their stacks of blue goods, tallying
receipts.
Hiroshige knows: constantly something else
going on
somewhere, the business of life, its energy,
motion,
stupidity, beauty, its dailyness depicted
truthfully, a little time caught in the dark
or the rain or beneath the bridge, drunk or
sober,
old, or young, with the umbrella
or the umbrella forgotten, and always
somebody counting the money.

The Lacemaker

Lacemaker at the casement
makes torchon, called beggar's lace,
fashions seed stitches, spiders, spirals,
leaves and lilies, fans along the border.
Keeps bobbins in order, tension even,
Sees knotted relationships between
weighted threads at the perimeter
and parchment pattern pricked out with pins.
Uses delicate linen thread
that can be spun only in dark basements
by girls who seldom see sunlight,
Behind Vermeer's woman at the window,
always the other artist: the spinner's pale
fingers,
the circling shadows of the fan-like wheel as
thread
flows like magic, white and fine as her
candlelit hair.
Behind every woman: mothers,
grandmothers from places as dark as the
womb,
constructing a net
to hold them above the dailyness
of their lives, claiming a corner
of design, making something lasting
and lovely, quiet as spiders,
conspirators, subversive, spinners.

Louisa and Boswell

(after reading Boswell's Diary)

Well, Mr. Boswell, X
cuse me! You thought 5 times was X
tra special in one night. Louisa X
tatic? You surely X
pected admiration, X
clamations! You got gonorrhea. No X
planation satisfied you. You were X
trodinarily Xtreme. You didn't X
pect her to return your 2 guineas. No Xs
for kisses came with them. No X
marks the spot. You were X
pert with this disease — 3 X
periences. Did she X
you out of her life? never thought of you X
cept in terms of X
crement?

Losing the Music

(Answering Thomas Hardy's "At
Casterbridge Fair: II Former Beauties")

Thomas Hardy, the girls who danced
wearing white gowns on the village green,
who flirted all night and trod
the grass slick with their slippered feet
dancing it down to a silver sheen,
these are the same dames you chanced
to notice in town on market day,
selling chickens, eggs, melons, salted cod.
They still remember and tap their feet
under their ugly skirts when music plays.
And they wonder at the man who glanced
at them with a wistful air, no joy
in him, only despair. They smile, nod
at his silk cravat and bowler hat, too-neat
shirt.

He can't be the fiddler's boy!

Datsolalee, Basketmaker

(1831?-1925)

In her own time and since Datsolalee has
been
the most celebrated American Basket
maker....
Gloria Roth Teleki
Once a dancer called Dabuda, young willow,
she gives up everything for the sedentary
passion
of weaving, grows fat, becomes Datsolalee,
wide-in-the-hips. Places her walking stick,
careful, her moccasins sinking into swampy
places
by Carson Creek where she gathers black
bracken fern stems
for her patterns, cuts yellow March osiers;
her hands caress their spring and liveliness,
flexible as dancers. She slices a two-inch
horizontal line
in redbud tree's bark, tugs it like a bell rope;
pulls it away in a vertical strip
that will not kill the tree. Later, soaks it,
picks it apart into delicate red-brown strands.
When the sheriff throws her Charlie in jail
for drinking and punching a deputy,
she shouts, tears her hair, stomps her feet,
then starts weaving wild, "My Mad Basket."
Trading post manager pays Charlie's fine,
gets him sprung, but she is still morose.
Finally Charlie hangs his head,
sweet-talks her, says everything in honey,
sings her a morning flowers song;
she laughs at him, turns her crazy designs
into animal tracks.

Her masterpiece, a degikup, fifty-one inches
in circumference,
its rake flaring out and returning in taut
weave,
more than thirty stitches to the inch —
100,000 all together.
Squinting at the intricate pattern,
her eyes haze over, concentrating
day after day, head aches.
Close to the end, she works by feel,
the pliant fibers like her own fingers.
Finishes it just before she goes blind.
Its pattern of dancing flames says,
"We assemble to discuss the happy lives
of our ancestors."

Sestina for Stars

(the Star Folks Speak)

The star folk love Wordsworth's poem about a girl

"fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky."

For him they cluster on the horizon, and they've made Dorothy their star.

They've bent their lights for centuries to see Dove Cottage and Lake Grasmere, the charm of the Lake District, the paths where charming Coleridge used to tramp with William and the girl

and daffodils spread out like a yellow sea.

They also like Anonymous, who loved the sky and wrote, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star —

They know they're sparklers, know night's horizon

is dark without them. They expand earthlings' horizons

with their metaphors, mystery, their unreachable charm.

Juliet says her love is cut out in little stars — she's so young, so smitten, a glowing girl.

She doesn't know the Bear. the Crab, the sky's

terror and terrible stories — sharks, the giant squid, the sea

horses hiding in coral caves. Juliet's love sees

night, though light comes spilling over the wide horizon.

The ancient Bedouin and sailors of the sea trusted the sky

and its power, the certainty inside the shine. Stars charmed

Browning who saw them in stone, in an invalid girl.

They like: "Hitch your wagon to a star."

They understand Frost's lonely stars and places, They knew when Whitman said he sees

"The great star early drooped..." They cried like girls

when Lincoln's soul crossed the last horizon.

They play the music of the spheres, charming the bright petals when the Perseides flower autumn's sky.

To go and catch a falling star might cost you a sky,

a light year if your touch breaks it. A broken star

loses its fascination, its integral charm.

It vacillates, its power becomes a see-saw. No longer constant, tracing the horizon, it cannot grant the wishes of girls.

Trepidation on the other side of the wheel; the sky's sea

of contradictions turns on North Star's hub, runs the timeless rimless horizon.

We are charmed by its dangers, by beauty bare, by the love of girls.

My Sheep

I put on my wool stockings, my copper tipped
clogs,
my shawl, take my brolly, go out to count the
sheep
on the hills. Their wool heavy, grey,
their ears slender as folded laurel leaves,
their faces of content turned down to the
pleasant grass,
they browse in the rain; I see them through
the green mist
as Beatrix Potter saw her long-haired
Cotswolds,
patrician-faced Leicesters, sturdy Herdwicks.
I check the salt licks, strew clean straw
bedding
in the sheepfold, pull their caught wool
from the hedges and rocks, stuff it in my
pockets
and spin it at night, sitting by the fireplace
writing stories for the child I never had,
conjuring her with Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail,
and Peter.

Veterans

At Vevay, Switzerland,
at the Pension Victoria & Geo.,
Ladislas Wisniewski coughs,
wears his faded Polish uniform.
Louisa May Alcott, traveling companion
to a spoiled rich girl, calls him Laurie,
recognizes a veteran who might have been
one of her boys from the Civil War
hospital where she nursed the wounded,
watched most of them die.
They have both seen too much blood,
heard too many last screams.
He had fought for freedom from Russia —
the Poles losing; she had enlisted for freedom
for the slaves. He is twenty; she turns thirty-
two,
but both are old in war. They make jokes,
sing, dance, but they know that none
of the others know, and are drawn together
by dyings they cannot speak of.

Mary Cassatt's Marriage

Why do I want Mary Cassatt to fall in love with
Degas?
To become his mistress? His wife?
Why aren't her paintings, her aquatints,
her careful pastels enough? I know
how sorrow follows sorrow, how many women
die in childbirth in the 19th century,
yet I want her pregnant, giving birth, holding
a fat, dependent baby, want her to offer her
hand
to her own *Child in a Straw Hat*, to take the
little girl
on her lap, smooth out the petulant pout
with a mother's kisses. In *Woman and Child*
Driving
why is it Mary's sister holding the reins
with Degas' niece beside her? Why isn't it
Mary
and her own daughter?
Maybe their quarrels would have been
terrible;
maybe they would have torn each other apart.
Would she have ripped his canvases?
Would he have thrown a paint pot at her
masterpiece?
Would it have been shouting, screaming,
hurling of dangerous words, sharper than
sculptors' chisels?
Or would the horse have lifted them both
above this world, galloping off
into fine, misty landscapes?

Not in the Cards

Edgar Degas' Portrait

Mary Cassatt holds her cards downward,
black dress and hat, serious expression on
her face.
Of course, she cannot marry Degas.
Too serious, her friends say, and not elegant
like his etching-aquatint, *Mary Cassatt at the*
Louvre.
Of course, she thinks it doesn't truly reflect
her.
They paint together. He inspires her, she
him.
She isn't glum; rather, she makes silly jokes.
Of course, passion's out of the question.
He uses her brushes and fills in the arms of
the chair
in *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*; she would
permit no one else.
Of course, she cannot become his mistress.
His family has lost all of its money.
Her family has immense railroad riches.
Of course, her family sniffs — "He's a
Frenchman."
He can sit in the cafes at night,
drink and tell stories with other male artists.
Of course, she cannot go to these low places.
Degas gives her the portrait. Both of them
know
what is meant by the symbolism, but they
can't speak it.
Of course, love had dealt her an unplayable
hand.

Buttoned Up

Dorothy and William Wordsworth,
July 14, 1802

Dorothy and William on their way
to London travel across Yorkshire in the rain.
Sitting atop the coach, "...we buttoned
ourselves both together in the Guard's coat."
She imagined them like the pair of swallows
who had made their nest on her window sill,
sitting close together and singing small songs
to each other. "...we liked the hills & the Rain
the better for bringing [us] so close to one
another.

I never rode so snugly."

In a few weeks

William is going to marry Mary Hutchinson.

They will never be so snug again.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, Scribbler

New Yorkers were amazed at this portrait
which hung in the National Theater when
the play, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, opened.

This face is mild, compassionate, shy.
Viewers expected an avenging harridan,
a devil in petticoats with sword
or butcher knife in hand, not white lace
on black sleeves and at the high neck,
a modest brooch.

Hawthorne's portrait hangs around the corner.

He castigated "those scribbling women,"

and she knows she's one of them,

trying to make frayed ends meet —

seven children and a husband with frequent
mental breakdowns.

She knows *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

solidified Northern opinion

against slavery as Hawthorne

had solidified it against ancestral Puritans.

Maybe that's why the corners of her mouth
turn up so slightly.

First Impression of Pisa

Mary and Percy Shelley arrive from Milan

Ragged prisoners, thin, hungry. Guards
curse,
use rifle butts as clubs. Dirty wretches
chained two-by-two sweep the cobbles,
clean the gutters, pull carts of refuse
like animals, humans as horses.
The child William dead, and Mary's pain
looms over them like Leaning Tower's black
vein
of shadow. Her father demands, gobbles
Shelley's funds, won't comfort Mary, claims
more. Their music: jangle of convict's chains.

Poor Lambs

After she stabs her mother to death,
the judge finds Mary Lamb guilty
of lunacy, and her brother, Charles,
who also suffers from depression
and their poverty, obtains her release
by promising to take responsibility for her.
She writes Sarah Stoddard, "My dear
mother...
is always in my poor head and heart."*
When she feels madness coming on again
and again,
she packs her portmanteau
and they walk down the Strand, arm in arm.
He carries the straitjacket in case they need it
before they arrive at the thick doors
of the asylum at Hoxton Hospital.
When she is sane, the two work
on their children's book,
Tales from Shakespeare. She writes the
preface
and the fourteen comedies and histories.
He writes six tragedies, but only his name
appears on the title. After all, she's only a
crazy woman.

Note

Letter to Sarah Stoddard, September 21,
1803.

Ardor for the Lie

"Ned tells that the Clock purrs and the
Kitten ticks. He inherits his Uncle Emily's
ardor for the lie."
Dickinson

Plato would have banished you, Emily,
and Walt, Edgar Allan, all those who came
after you,
Marianne, Elizabeth, William Carlos, T.S.,
Robert of the distinguished ancestors,
Anne and Sylvia,
But Plato's hourglass didn't purr or tick;
my bedside clock splats, like a faucet
dripping,
and its numbers glow red like hearth fires
outside the walls of the Acropolis
in the huts of the Plaka
where the poets give birth in pain,
where they trudge out every morning
to dig and delve in the thistle-choked fields,
blooming with stiff purple blossoms
and poppy-red lies.

Emily Dickinson

Isolation is
fuel for your use.
Love denied the match,
lit your lyric fuse.
Whirling like pinwheels
in electric air,
you wrote the inner spirit,
exquisite in despair

The Blacksmith's Wife

Tall, icicle white,
she wears her blond braids like a crown.
He's short and bent,
his black leather apron
pocked and sooted, hands stenciled
with ashes, iron dust, forge-coal.
His fire roars, orange-tongued
in Vulcan's oven; the great doors of the shop
open
and a pair of patient Clydesdales stand, the
fine hair
of their fetlocks fringing their black polished
hooves.
The hammer spits sparks, rings like church
bells
while red hot arcs are shape-beaten, thrown
in a tank to sputter, speak steam,
and all the time at home his wife moves
smooth as water,
kind to old agnostic Carrie Stump, who has no
money,
but has a caustic tongue; the wife against the
current,
a liberal Lutheran amongst a conservative
synod.
If her cold anvil holds his fire,
then you, the solid earth, and I, intemperate
air,
can come together, join, turn, vow
to become more than individual.
It takes two to make metaphor.

Effie Harrelson' Treasures

1934

She moves slow,
an enormous fat caterpillar,
inching toward us four-year-old urchins
in Sunday School, and we love her,
love her waist encircled by great rolls
of flesh like puffy inner tubes, her upper arms
drooping over her elbows, her legs
tree trunks, her ankles rippling
above her shoes. Infinitely patient,
she persuades Kenny Ralph to finally
put his penny in the collection plate.
Teaches us Bible verses and to sing
"Jesus Loves Me," urges us to save
small change in mite boxes
for the missionaries, awards us gold stars.
When Wayne Miller turns five she winds
the tin cake which mysteriously plays
"Happy Birthday" and all us believe
in miracles after that.
She laughs a lot, shaking all over,
the scent of her Lilies of the Valley
talcum powder overcoming
the church's musty basement smell.
She hugs Maggie Small who comes barefoot
because the Smalls are so poor.
When she is about to die, gives away
her earthly treasures. She brings me
a green glass basket,
and I look at her through its curved
and bubbled sides where she becomes
elongated,
slim, a mermaid swimming away
through the green glass water.

Remembering the Terril Consolidated School

At Evergreen Cemetery
the bristly pines scratch
against each other like the sound
of Casper Clark's janitor's broom
on the school's stone steps.
I remember him sweeping
and cleaning, pushing
his wide grey dust mop
along the hardwood floors,
trailing the sweet scent of oil.
I couldn't resist
that yellow slickness —
I took off my shoes and skated
down the hall in my stocking feet
before Miss Hoeglum's cold fingers
dug into my shoulder.
I see those school rooms,
the sun shining through tall,
many-paned windows,
the picture of George Washington
peering down at the class
from his perch
above the blackboard,
the scarred desks
with their iron knees
bent to hold first-graders,
the books I first learned to read
emanating joy —
everything enveloped in light,
glowing and luminous.

Wisdom at Fourteen

Alice Baldwin and I knew that our parents
were never really young. My dad had been
born
wearing his steel-toed shoes, my plump
mother
had always teetered around the house
in her old, run-over high heels. Alice's dad
had always had his pot belly, her mother
white hair,
and when Mrs. Baldwin tried to tell us about
love,
saying it was knowing a man's worst faults,
but loving him despite them — or maybe even
because
of them, Alice and I giggled.
We had seen Scarlet O'Hara and Rhett Butler
and we knew what love was.

Neighbors, Little Spirit Lake, August Morning

Wearing her faded housedress and apron,
She has her old boat tipped over,
painting it with a new coat of red,
Florence with the fungus in her lungs
that Roger worried about,
Florence going back and forth to the hospital
in Sioux Falls. Roger thought she was going
to die, but she didn't, and Roger did,
cancer, and he went fast. I wanted
to talk to Florence about him this morning,
but she wouldn't say much.
We stood there in the August sun,
awkward, looking across the lake to the
cottage
that used to be his, the fish poles still hanging
on his porch, worms drying up in his bait box,
his Irish setter struck by a car. We couldn't
save her.
Both gone now, but Florence
is still working, fixing her boat, getting ready
to go fishing.

St. Barbara McClintock of the G-Nomes

Protecting the four corners of Microbiology,
terra cotta creatures, known by artists
for centuries in other forms — gargoyles
from the Renaissance? disguised angels?
gods of Aruba cloaked in Mayan robes?
these G-names, regulator genes, controller
genes,
color conductors, turn maize kernels red,
black, pale yellow, ride protein horses,
are heritage policepersons,

O, scientists,
remember unscientific brainlock that kept
Barbara McClintock's work from recognition
for thirty years. She found maize ring
chromosomes
that break, repair themselves,
alleles that jump like grasshoppers, kick
up their heels, pack their DNA, move,
although it wasn't proven until
the electron microscope. She asked herself,
"What would I do if I were a maize G-nome?"
Get into the kernel's starchy white heart.
Alone she maps the first controlling element,
develops a "slightly scandalous suggestion"
contrary to the accepted theory that genes
were strung together like a train on a track.
Linear and fixed. Barbara finds
they jump the tracks, uncouple
themselves, recouple, insert themselves
between other elements, turn other genes
off and on like signal lights.
Her powers of perception so refined she
knows
each plant by name, records each day's
differences.
Under the microscope sees "internal parts
of the chromosomes." She "...feels as if
I were right down there and these were my
friends."

Dismissed by authorities in her field,
a geneticists calls her, "just an old bag
who's been hanging around Cold Spring
Harbor too long."

Lederberg called her "either crazy or a
genius."

She asks him and his colleagues to leave
her lab, throws them out for their arrogance.
She feels she has crossed a desert alone
and no one has followed.

Thomas Aquinas saw seraphim,

Robert Millikan saw electrons.

Albert Einstein saw mathematics,

envisioned riding a beam of light.

Barbara McClintock sees chromosomes,

sees their skittish G-nomes,

St. Thomas, Robert, Albert, Barbara

and the four G-nomes above our heads,

protect these classrooms, greenhouses,

laboratories,

empower all the microscopes, magnify the

pure light

of reason, shower largess from

unconventional

science; encourage the open mind.

The darkness opens a little from time to time.

St. Barbara McClintock of the G-Nomes

[Another version]

Gargoyles from Star Trek

Gargoyles from star trek? disguised angels?
These terracotta G-nomes, regulator genes,
controller genes, color conductors,
turn maize kernels red, black, pale yellow,
are heritage policepersons, riders of protein
horses.

Creatures, known by artists for centuries
in other forms, watch over, four corners.

Barbara McClintock
forgive science, unscientific
brainlock — that kept your work thirty years
from recognition. You found maize ring
chromosomes that break, repair themselves,
alleles that jump like grasshoppers, kick
up their heels, pack their DNA, move
although it wasn't proven until
the electron microscope. You ask your self
"What would I do if I were a maize G-gnome?"
Get into the kernel's white, starchy heart.
Alone she maps the first controlling element,
develops a "slightly scandalous suggestion"
contrary to the accepted theory that genes
were strung together like cars on a train,
track. Linear and fixed. Barbara
finds they jump the tracks, uncouple
themselves, recouple, insert themselves
between other elements, turn other genes
off and on like signal lights.

Her powers of perception so refined she
knows

each plant by name, notices differences
each day. Under the microscope, can see
"internal parts of the chromosomes." She
"...feels as if I were right down there
and these were my friends,"

Dismissed by prominent scientists,
a geneticist, calls her "just an old bag
who's been hanging around Cold Spring
Harbor too long,"

Lederberg called her "either crazy or a
genius."

She asks him and his colleagues to leave
her lab, throws them out for their arrogance,
"She feels she has crossed a desert alone
and no one has followed her."

Thomas Aquinas saw seraphim.

Robert Millikan saw electrons.

Albert Einstein saw mathematics,
envisioned travelling on a beam of light.

Barbara McClintock sees chromosomes,
sees their parts, skittish G-nomes,
"after synapses... they elongate, get fatter,
...after anaphase in the first division...
they just unravel, arms sticking down...
second division...chromosomes elongate —
hugely long arms coming down..."
changing; "they can do anything."

Saint Thomas, Robert, Albert, Barbara,
and four G-nomes above our heads,
protect these classrooms, greenhouse,
laboratories,

empower all the microscopes, magnify the
pure light

of reason, shower largess for unconventional
science; protect the open mind.

Because the night always surrounds us.

Woman Before an Aquarium
by Henri Matisse

Pine cones swim
among green branches;
the thin arms of the brown-haired woman
rest on the table; her chin
rests on her hand. She watches
the gold fish in a round aquarium,
her eyes fish, aqueous and indolent,
the translucent dance of fins,
the dance of the imagination,
like the small promise that holds the glass
bowl
together, that holds the earth in orbit,
and leashes errant moons whose patterns
appear on the screen behind her.

Sylvia Plath

I am taking the Green Line to Devon
in winter, Sylvia, the silver rain
gently prods the gravel path and Court
Green's
green door, thatched roof, back yard grown
wild again
with weather-tangled briars, grass uncombed.
I find the last of your silvered straw hives
and put my ear to their weathered ovens
listening for hums. Are they dead or alive?
I do this for you, Sylvia, I pour
petrol, baptizing, washing away blame,
and light the straw skeps (the executor
will never get these). Bees blossom with
flame,
take flight, soar, shower sparks. Fire opens
them like Roman candles, like your poems.

Kathleen Spivack's Study

Foam white walls, great windows that could
look out
over the sea, if the sea had been there;
here, over the neighbor's rose garden,
another kind of consistency, beauty with
peril —
shelves of books documenting other journeys,
blue glass lamps, blue letter racks, blue
filecases.
Laid atop them a thick, twelve-foot long
board,
varnished like the wood of a good ship.
This is no study — it's a workroom, large
enough to construct a boat. There could be
sawing here,
hammering, gluing joints, fastening clamps
screwed down to hold mahogany secure, to
make everything
watertight and yar. Ceiling high enough
for a sail loft, for stitching canvases, for
sewing
jibs, for outfitting the explorer
on her way to the undiscovered country.

Ruth Rogers
1926-1986

Tuesday, April 29, 1986
Today the nuclear energy plant at Chernobyl
is burning.
The Russians cannot put out the fire.
The Ukraine glows in the dark like an old
alarm clock,
the hills — beacons; the trees — torches;
the little stone houses will click like
grasshoppers
for centuries.
Today seven black hearses wheel slow
across Florida, carrying seven astronauts.
But they explode forever
in the fireball of our imaginations,
flung into outer space
among the six lonely sisters,
a new and shining company.
On this day of burning we buried Ruth Rogers
who forgave the furnaces of Auschwitz
her mother and father,
who forgave the conflagration of cancer
in her own veins,
who forgave her friends
their irrelevant compassion.
Tonight the lilacs wilt on her grave
in the Jewish cemetery,
but fire flies appear early
and stitch the darkness
beside her name.

Catherine Holtzman
(1954-1990)

We see her and Jim as in an impressionist
painting,
drifting in the rowboat
near the shore where overhanging branches
stipple the water with sunlight. The composer
rests
on the oars, listening for adagios.
The harpist does not trail her fingers
in the green water, saving her calluses
for the caresses of metal strings.
Her dark hair blows across her shoulder;
her pale face content now. Little Spirit Lake
calm;
blue heron watches them with one eye,
immobile as a dead branch.
Old turtle does not move from his rock,
suns himself on his throne. Muskrat gathers
water weeds.
Cottonwoods whisper. She knows what they
say,
but the rest of us don't know,
don't see the shadow she has left on the dock
for a little while — long enough to make this
picture.

Dancing Among Women

American and Kuwaiti Women
at Mai's Party

When the door closes behind the Sheik,
Mai whips off her head covering,
as do the other women,
shaking loose their thick, black hair.
Like nuns freed
from their habits and coifs,
they come to life, chatter like birds —
even the old grandmother tries
her few words of English.
After the banquet
someone turns on the stereo
and intense Arabia music throbs.
The Kuwaiti women kick
the Persian rugs,
kick off their Italian shoes,
and dance — solo —
short, fast, hesitating steps.
Their hands dance, too.
they tie long black scarves
around their hips
and rotate,
rotate their stomach muscles.
Belly dancers!
these modest Moslem matrons!
They tie the scarves around us,
and we dance awkward,
but feel the desert sun,
hear the flutes,
bump with the heart beats
of drum heads
made from fine sheep vellum.
We dance the rhythms
of this place of the past
where the dust of our ancestors
dances. We dance and dance
They open their mouths
with wild, high-pitched cries,
trilling their tongues;
They ululate, ululate, ululate.

Syrian Picnic

The Syrians know how to provision a picnic —
they bring their carpets, tables, plastic chairs,
the baby's high chair, cooking pans
stirring spoons, tea kettle, and a bottle of
mazoot
with a ring on top for cooking. They pile all
this
into the back of a pickup with the women and
children,
aunts, uncles, cousins, grandmothers and
grandfathers
with their canes. They unload beside the river
or among the elegant ruins at Apeneia where I
am sitting
on a broken round of Roman-carved pillar,
eating my sandwich and apple, having never
before realized
my poverty of picnics.
In July when their crowded flats bake in the
desert heat,
the poor of the city sardine themselves into a
service
and ride out to the ring highway
and set up their picnics in the median. They
stay
till midnight or later while the heat of the day
rises
higher than the minarets, and finally a small
breeze
from the east dances the women's long black
abayas.

Dead Head Dancing

The groupies who follow the Grateful Dead
around the country are called Dead Heads
Too poor to buy tickets, they dance
in the parking lots, in the foyers,
in the hallways before the shut doors.
Girls in flowered dresses, barefoot,
turn in great petal-like circles.
Some hold their babies as they dance, heads
 tilted
to the side, listening to a music within.
The men wear pony tails, earrings, their vans
painted with psychedelic symbols. They sell
baskets, tie-dyed tee shirts, sandals and
 services:
one van is a tattoo parlor, in another a girl will
 braid
your hair with beads. They reconstruct the
 sixties
they never knew, undulating in a dream,
arms uplifted toward something invisible,
dancing to "American Beauty," and "Box of
 Rain."

Weaving Like Dancing

The Hupa shaman women invent patterns
for their twined hats, double triangles,
starred diamonds, lightning ladders,
symbols of their spirit power.
When they spread the powdered paints
and shake the knuckled thunder stones,
they can cure diseases
by dreaming and dancing.
Aunt Cord Ritchie peels osiers with her teeth,
fashions the oriole basket with folded squares
at the handle dyed with hemlock bark.
Puts on her Sunday dress, her amber beads,
sits on the porch with a switch of canes
curved, easy as an old friend, in her hand
when Doris Ulman takes her picture.
Says she would die if she had to live
without willows.

Shaker Baskets

Shaker baskets were woven over molds
so they came out even, symmetrical, pure,
like the dances in the evening.
Men on one side of the room,
women on the other —
the wind of the spirit
bends them like willows.

Dancing on Rooftops

"The roof dance is an annual event to
celebrate spring."
 High school girl

Spring ice turns grey and soft, drifts weep,
and a warm wind clatters like a ghost pony
through the woods' tree tops.
In this country bare of history and myth,
the young have no holidays
for carrying branches of lilac
through the town, or parading
a fir decorated with paper roses,
or dancing around the pear tree.
But something deep in the blood stirs,
demands ceremony, elevation, exultation.
At Beaver Park, Washington High School
kids climb to the picnic pavilion roofs,
toss down their tennis shoes,
sing, "We're off to see the Wizard,"
and dance barefoot in the sunshine,
in the moonlight, the rough, gritty shingles
under their white, winter feet.

Watching for Dancing Partners

sculpture by Allan Houser
Museum of the Southwest,
Midland, Texas

Two Indian girls bend together,
wrapped in long, fringed shawls,
heavy crosses on their sturdy necks,
centuries of concealed emotions in their
cheek bones,
schooled impassivity in the tilt of their chins.
Their faces turn upward,
not ready to reveal expectation.
They do not smile, their smiles buried
beneath their stone lips
can wait a thousand years,
but a dancing wind blows their long, marble
skirts.

Aubade with Grandchildren

Let their parents sleep
while I listen to them remake
the world. They are bees, buzzing through
the orchard, all the new blossoms
in the cherry trees. They are sparrows
twittering
as if they were rich. They are new grass
and audacious dandelions. They are
the beginning that doesn't know
any ending. I give them ice cream
and Cheerios for breakfast,
construct Legos, play Chutes and Ladders,
push their swings for an hour,
because nothing matters
except their laughter. They laugh
for no reason except that they are
alive this delicious morning.

Old Lady in a Red Robe

An old lady, red robe,
propped up on pillows.
Nurse rolls up the soiled sheets,
carries them out as if on parade.
I hate her; we both know her, the marshal of
death,
but we're too polite to name her awful name.
The daughter isn't here, the beloved
adopted daughter who resents illness, her
mother,
the whole world, resents the older son — the
real son,
the failure son in California, and she the
successful daughter.
She lives nearby, but won't come,
although the nurse costs \$20 an hour.
The old woman can't afford it.
The nurse marches in with a carafe of water,
wants a medal for her meritorious actions.
The old woman's hands are thin
and mottled, every knobby joint protrudes.
The world is turning away, gently now,
and overflowing with what might have been
and wasn't and the beloved children, both so
far away.

Mother Country

At Great Spirit Lake
seemingly innocent clouds
drift past, but I recognize
Effie and little Agnes,
stuffing pillow ticks with goose feathers.
Mother and Vivian hang white sheets
on the blue Iowa air.
Harriet and Sylvia dance over snow drifts with
Ishtar.
The *Girl with Amphora* from Aleppo drifts
past,
Pouring milk from her bottomless jar.
The old aunts swim beside Artemis
who wears her lifejacket of pomegranates.
I see that the old gods and the old people
Who have gone before have not let go,
Will never let go, have disguised themselves
A little, but they still hover here
In the pregnant, puffing air.

[Mother Country Another version]

Seeing Through the Disguises

At Great Spirit Lake
seemingly innocent clouds
drift past, but I recognize
Great Aunt Sophia and little Agnes
stuffing pillow ticks with goose feathers.
Skinny Grandma Min turns
into a twisted pillar. Ishtar
glides past, dancing on ice flows.
She overtakes a scorpion sphinx from Aleppo,
flexing his wings. Isis, worshiped in Egypt,
chases fat white bees. They pass through
the enormous white eyes of Baal and Bell.
Artemis, wearing her life jacket
of pomegranates, swims in the endless
blue desert of Iowa skies.
I see that the old gods and the old people
who have gone before have not let go,
will never let go, have disguised themselves
a little, but they still hover
in the pregnant, puffing air.

Yeast

When the mirror cracks,
the marriage wears out,
the daughter runs off with an oaf,
flour your hands,
a thin white protection
against the viscosity of the dough
and the troubles of this world;
knead it until it's smooth and elastic
and responsive to your touch.
Let it rise again
like the heart.

Uncollected Poems

Amanda Jane Doesn't Send this Letter

Ten years have passed,
but the tide still roars in, sighs out,
blue heron beats his way north, drifts south
with the autumn light. October frost
sets transparent teeth along the shore,
stops up the river. April frees it.
I married another man as I told you
I would, have four good children,
a dependable boat moored in the bay,
a hundred lobster pots
for my blue and canary buoys,
and a long, long memory.

Arguments

The foam comes in, rising toward the sun,
stranded on the beach in iridescence and
futility.
"I still argue with my father, my friend admits,
though he's been dead ten years."
Arguments redundant as the waves of the sea
falling on each other in shining chaos.
"The eternal note of sadness" washes in with
the tides,
returns "with the turbid ebb and flow of human
misery."
Few islands of affection in the family,
no archipelagoes of warm embrace.
What affection do you remember? What kiss?
What hug? Alice remembers one Saturday
night
when she was five, father took her hand
and walked with her to the car parked by the
Farmer's Cash.
The freighters hang on the horizon like old
stories
waiting for the Coast Guard to open the book.
If the approval never comes, they turn slowly
on the anchor chain, waiting, rusting in the
salt air.
Old man on narrow bed, prisoned by steel
rails,
tied down by green oxygen tubes that hiss
like the bow of the ship breasting the curl of
the wave,
unable to speak, but his pale blue eyes,
the left one flecked with gold, the right one
with its spoke
of brown, flash commands, demand
obedience
insist on control. The blue jelly fish wash up
on the white sand beach, the ghost shrimp
burrow in before the sea birds can spear
them. I remember
the beating with the razor strop, the welts,
and later,
the morning he bawled me out, roaring and
raging
because I carelessly tumbled down the cellar
steps
where the hired man had left open the trap
door.

The hired man was shaking, scared, too.
The sting ray, wounded, perhaps a shark bite,
is a collapsed cushion now. The past
condenses
like the pearly mist at sundown. I had to tell
him
I wasn't hurt. Years later the X-rays showed
the cracked vertebrae. Yet the stain of
sundown
is ever just below the horizon; I was always
afraid.
The clouds drift past, oblivious to hate and
love,
the sand says nothing. The laughing gulls cry.
Then it came to me, unannounced and
unsought,
crept in, quiet as grace; he had given me life
twice.
The local doctors thought I had childhood
leukemia;
they drained pint after pint of his blood for me,
and it saved me until the Mayo Clinic doctors
saved us both long ago and far inland.
The sea drains through the great sifter of the
sand;
it leaves its signs: seaweed, small clams,
broken bottles.
Grace said to me, "Isn't that enough?
and the knot untied itself, the iron anchor
chain broke.
Why did this come so late, when the ignorant
armies
had clashed by day and night for centuries?
Although I no longer hear their cries,
I know they still struggle for many others.
That it came to me at all is mysterious,
unexplainable, a gift unexpected and
undeserved,
like the tableau of the clouds, lifting their
crowns
along the endless seam between sea and
sky,
like the constant roads of foam which lead
to the end of nowhere, lovely in their
lightness,
as the words drift off the margins of the page,
as the pages crumble in the broken libraries,
but Alice deserved better than once
her hand in his, better than that and more.

Bad Advice on Marriage

Oh, friendship is a solid base
for marriage — after a fashion
but if I have to choose the case,
I know I'll opt for passion.
It's wings, like those of Icarus
leap wildly through the night
and even if I fall, am crushed,
It was a lovely flight.

Bad Girl Poems

I

Best Offer, Sri Lanka
Reality's hard; the money's soft.
Going price, a bargain to "off"
somebody is only fifty bucks,
American

but it was just my luck
the one or two I would not regret
lived on another continent.

II

After Reading an Obituary
When she
who, gratuitously,
had knifed me in the back, died,
I said I was sorry. I lied.
I confess I'm terribly guilty
of a lack of decent charity.
I saw with mirror clarity
that I was glad.

III

Inconvenient Logic of Logic
My heavenly mansion is for rent,
gone, sweep of angel wings as well;
paradise a crumbling tenement,
but thus deprived of afterlife
if I would be consistent, right,
I can no longer hope you'll go to hell.

Ballad of the Beauty Grown Old

When I was twenty-one, my love,
and you were twenty-two,
to catch the world and twist his tail
was what we meant to do.
For we were young and fleet of foot
and arrogant and free,
and we had woven lovely nets
of perfect artistry.
But world is a sulky beast;
he hid within his lair.
While we were hunting on the beach,
the tide washed in despair.
The wind blew in old age, my love;
the stars shone stonily;
the beast did not play fair. He knew
how brief our history.

The Baskets of Superstition

Willow and witch come from the same root,
oh golden bough, and she soaks the strands
and bends them toward her invisible pattern,
curves a handle for it so she can carry
wormwood from the fields, mandrake from the
forest.

Yesterday no mushrooms, but this morning
their white
erections
pierce the leaf mold. She gathers these into a
basket,
and where her skirt touches, tomorrow there
will be more,
What sorcery does she hide beneath those
lids?
I dare not turn the pins to open them.
Remember, Cleopatra's asp came in a basket
of figs,
packed in the dark among the sweet purple
globes,
he with his final sweetness.

Better Gods

Sunflower, Sunflower, turning
your countenance to your lover,
the perfidious sun, who left Clytie
for you, Leuclothe.
Spitefulness, spitefulness, jealous Clytie
tells your father, Orchamus, Persian king,
who buries you, ruined daughter, alive,
he not fit to be king
not fit to be father
not fit to be man
We must find better gods
than the Greeks, than Apollo,
better Persians than the king
and Clytie, better stories.
Mistaken in your ardor, Leuclothe,
you could not stay bound
in the dark, could not die to the world,
to the sun, Fidelity was the blood
in your body. Faithfulness your bone.
You, out of the sand of the grave,
out of the husk of your skin.
out of the nothing left
from desertion, discovers petals in your DNA,
the black and white nubs that grow
into seeds for your acolytes,
those scraps of sunlight,
who take pity on you,
Gold Finches, who flit about you,
their songs nourished now and forever.

Birthmother

Mist, fog, grey rain floods,
dark as the lung's wounded bays —
stopped with rags to keep the blood
from spurting out,
red pools, red spouts
like a whale, wounded by Jonah within
(who would be delivered in three days),
but who will deliver leviathan?

Boundaries

For him the borders are open gates.
No exit permits demanded, no passports
required,
no baksheesh.
For her the boundaries are like nooses.
Uniformed officials, their chests covered with
medals
scowl over her documents. The highway is
barricaded,
bridges washed out, closed because of
bandits.
Lakes and rivers disappear, oceans recede.
Desert increases; the trees of the forest
converge,
cover the footpaths; their branches hide
sunlight.
Men and women live in different countries,
speak different languages.
Sometimes they reach across the lines on the
maps,
their fingers touching, their lips, their bodies
becoming
one sweet geography. But after waking they
must return
to the old establishment: moats, guards,
concertina wire
between them.

Note

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The Dependable

All this housewifery,
round and round with cleaning.
I can count on tons of stellar fall out
drifting down to earth, which must
be washed away, wiped away
by maids, housekeepers, wives, mothers,
and by me, by all of us women.
I think I've moved thousands
of pounds of it.
I know that tomorrow more will arrive,
sifting dumbness for me,
shaking circular necessity which
gives structure to existence.
Unlike most of my life,
dust is dependable.

Desert

A gigantic steel choreboy
scoured her daydreams, wearing away
at the unseemly paintings there.
All the time the brass sky
shimmered above her, the rim
of a gigantic magnifying glass
examining her conscience —
found it full of baroque architecture
stained glass foliage,
candelabra fashioned from tree limbs —
all trivial, impractical
sinful. There she was
under the iron anvil of goodness
breasts flattened, arms pressed down
She cried in the night, of course,
because in the enormous desert of silence
no word that began with sex could be said;
nothing beautiful could be named.

Dissecting the Bones

Time is a bone that cannot be broken.
I have gnawed on the bones of yesterday,
grown hungry on the gristle of corruption,
 broken the horns
of the extinct dinosaurs, smashed the rafters
 and lintel
of old houses. I knocked on the missing doors
and entered the grand aisles of fallen stones,
shaped on six sides by the stone mason.
I knelt on the floor of the tent at the loom and
 strung the warp
for conversation with the woof when this was
 the only poem
allowed a woman, the ghazals in fabric.
I sat in the tea shop and drank tea.
I sat in the tavern and drank the nut brown
 ale.
I drank the bitter brew of loneliness.
No one could read my weavings, the
 conversation stopped
at the fringes, and I was lonely as the strange
 bird
perched on the branch, gazing down at a
 flock
of sparrows who did not speak my language.
Minutes passed and the days, the bone
 harder than stone,
harder than talk of crows and vultures,
harder than hypocrites' pronouncements.
The apple skin is also hard, harder than bone,
harder than elephant ivory, tougher than
 diamonds.
I have not found any way out of the apple.

Doll Quilt

Anonymous artist, only this
doll quilt is left of your story.
The flying geese pattern: wings of gold print;
bodies cobalt blue linen against the muslin
sky you imagined. Were you telling
your daughter the heights were false?
Were you saying that wings carried
a dark burden? Or that wings
were golden, a hope that one girl
might be able to escape a woman's life
of poverty, subjugation?

Écriture féminine

Letters of the alphabet,
children of the mind, you come
in endless combinations.
Supple enough to be anything—
binoculars with which to see
the new moon with straight l's
becomes mine, you little curled up wonders.
You are finger bones of the miraculous,
more powerful than abracadabra.
Excavate the ivory skeleton
that sleeps in the grave of Charlotte Bronte,
the graves of Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret
Fuller,
Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Harriet Beecher
Stowe,
Virginia Wolfe, Willa Cather, Sarah Orne
Jewett.
Hold up the broken skull, the old bone face
before your face, sisters, look through
the eye sockets and observe what our
foremothers
only dreamed of — new sween rising,
oowling the dust, The little ones are coming
home. They sit in the crook of my fingers,
comfortable on the keys of your computer.
Now there can be unnamings and new namings,
and Alpha and Omega
will be called Daughter and Mother.

Eve's Children

She could not have guessed that two of you
would play the harp, could pluck the strings
that speak
to the spirit's inner turmoil, to renew
the old heart, which like Saul's, or like hers,
breaks
among the broken and sings among the
pieces.
She could not have guessed that one of you
would ride the hunter, take the jumps, the
fences,
as if you and the horse were one sinew.
And one of you smoked pot, copped out,
rebelled,
refused the world of thought, or work, of art
and huddled with a joint for wife, compelled
to staring at the wall, to dreaming, part
of another state of pleasure and pain
where you spent everything for sweet
cocaine.

Fancywork

Cutwork, eyelet embroidery, the linen scarf
for the walnut chest worked with flowers done
in lazy-daisy stitch with French knot centers,
drawn work, knitting, tatting — bone shuttles
hold threads without tangle.

Buttonholes circumscribe your life?

Can you stitch your way out or does your
crocheting

bind you closer in those twisted loops?

What if you didn't follow the pattern?

What if you didn't round off? What if you kept
on going out the door, your bobbin lace ham
under your arm

and the paper patterns punched on your
heart?

The First Eden

Eden, my dear, is the womb,
warm, lush, tropical, a salt lagoon
to float in, no need to eat, the flesh
nourished by miracle. The curlicue,
the cuticle grow, and Adam flexes his toes.
He will be expelled, oh, he will be driven out
into the need for clothing in the cold green,
delivered up to the real world where he must
suck the empty nipple for three days,
where he must work, sweat beading his baby
brow
before the sweet milk comes.

For a Daughter Going Away

Do not spread yourself like butter
on everyone else's bread.
Why open your soft red mouth
while the cruel train
rackets along the rails and air-conditioning
makes a fine unnatural air,
a deadly humming? Look out the window
in silence as the grey houses swim past
and the grey people fish-stare at you
from their grey windows. Always wave
at the children. There is some hope.
Don't sit next to garrulous old ladies
who have diabetes and ungrateful children.
They will tell you about it. Move
to another place when the gal with the blood-
bright
lipstick says she's against divorce, but
sometimes it's the only way. She ought to
know —
she's been divorced four times. Don't waste
any round words on distinguished middle-
aged men.
They know what they're doing.
Don't give all your heart away to strangers,
or even those you love.
Save some of yourself for the long days
and the unknown nights.

Note

Published in *Fine Arts Discovery*

For a Teen-age Reader

Nothing's like *Romeo and Juliet* —
passion so fast, so complete, it defies
formality, circumspection, sense, gets
the old nurse mumbling two husbands, flies
in the face of interdiction. Bright
hopes, bad timing, but sweet love is noble
even with poison, and the sword's bite
is scarcely murder when the heart's troubled!
The feuding parents get what they deserve,
and so do you when you accept it, deceive
yourself that love is everything. Reserve
something in your first dance. Keep it;
believe
that even love has reason. You deserve
long life, warm nights, children. A cold
dagger
is a one-time lover, cruel forever.

Ghazal

I thought that after all those years
surely you would be fat and bald, the years
would surely have their tax from you —
men don't disguise themselves
the way women do. I use the creams and
lotions
to erase, or more honestly, conceal the years.
I thought I'd see you at some alumni party,
you with her, I with him, The years
could not have snuffed the shiny gleam,
of recognition from the room, despite the
years,
Or maybe not. Perhaps you'd grown dull,
Republican,
and I would cringe the toll of twenty years.
Though, where might that young sweetness
gone?
Or not gone? I lie the years.

Ghazal after Bad Dreams

This morning you awoke to those voices
speaking in wings and brickbats, a language
of foreign voices.
The TV's wonky again, wonky whacky, you
think voices
not to be trusted. As water slips over stones,
there arose voices
to lure you to places you abjure. You hate the
president of bitter plums,
and don't know how to translate the icicle
frozen voices.
It was so easy to let them take you by the
ears and trick you
into running with them, barefoot over sharp
shells — those slow voices
that do not have your good in mind, but the
good of foreign fruits
the tough skin, thin flesh, bitter seeds that
sow voices
of deception. They get you. After you
surrender control,
you find thorny hedges, stone barriers,
detours. You hear voices
approve. They applaud. You want to learn this
language, want
to love the landscape bereft of Christmas
trees. Wind closes voices
that say, "You have enlisted in the ordinary
which is dull and sensible."
But you secretly hate the stew of foolish
frippery the posed voices
validate even though now you have no voice
of your own, no language
to pull off the leaves, expose the pumpkin and
squash of the rows of voices
where there is no thinking, only slogans,
ritual, platitudes of pie
and the tinnitus of those voices.
Where is your voice, the voice that believes
when you talk?
the true voice that will speak truth to
falsehood
even though falsehood has no ears to hear, at
least one voice
should, yes, yes, YOU will speak, even if it's
the only voice.

Greek Women

Penelope sits at the loom weaving her
tapestry,
plucks it out in the dark, lucky
that addled suitors snore, their saddles
for pillows, oblivious from swilling
the wine of Achilles from his finest
barrels (Penelope figured the lesser peril),
unraveling the yarn; her husband, traveling
home, pauses a few years with Circe, worn.
Clytemnestra takes a lover, takes the diadem
of state, sets the watchman on the roof late
at night to spot the beacon of return — the
sight
she never thought she'd live to see;
Agamemnon comes home with his boots on,
along with Cassandra his captive, her song
a warning, unheeded that strange morning.
Far away and still the same — the spoils of
war
employed as they always are: the women of
Troy
brought home with the booty. Penelope,
weave, plot,
warp and woof, the taut strings of that loom-
harp
play while a queen remembers Iphigenia,
slays
a king, and Helen, dazed, comes home a
heroine.

He married his secretary.

I say young men, whom I might have married
who are old men now as I am an old woman,
I remember love, or what there was of it;
I say you were all worthy of love,
of fine and beautiful partners, and I hope
happiness still falls down on your shoulders
like warm sunshine in springtime,
and although this is the last lap of our
circumstances
I say remember me or forget me.
I promise I will not whisper your names
when I am dying.

Interpreting the Songs

Was Jupiter attracted by Io's exquisite body,
her animated face, her volcanic personality?
Her charm is still enough to rock his magnetic
axis
ten degrees from side to side as she circles
him.
Of course, Hera was jealous, turned Io into a
white heifer
and set Argus to guard her. When Hera
looked up
at night, old thousand eyes was watching
everything.
But Mercury of the winged sandals sneaked
in
and dispatched him. To retrieve human form
Io moved to Egypt, gave birth to her son
on the golden sands of the Middle Sea:
her L-bursts are songs of waves rushing
rushing, shushing.
The Greeks tell whom Jupiter chose,
but did the woman have a choice? Did Io
say yes to his blandishments or was she
overcome?
Did she regret the liaison? her life as a beast?
Her S-burst song is staccato like hail on a tin
roof.
Are these epithets against her ravisher?
against Hera who blamed the victim?
against her jailer and the white leather coat
she was forced into?

It Can't Get Worse

"I'll get a gun and shoot you right between the
eyes."
She doesn't think he'll do it,
but fear is a snake
He's hunting jobs, wolf worrying the scent
but the rabbits
keep to their burrows
An arrest would ruin his prospects,
she thinks.
She straps the boys in their car seats. They're
little puppies
tells them they're on vacation
at the motel.
She thinks he'd be better if he had steady
work, the leader of the pack
in the land of antelope.
He says
she's so bad that he can't do anything,
she's the one standing in his way, the one
who upset him so that he was fired from all
those past jobs.
She thinks it can't get worse.

Jonah's Daughter

Where the sea curls
his foam-flecked lip,
I watch, clutching
the pilings lest I run straight
into his wet and sandy mouth,
down into the naked gullet.
I know that sometime
I'll have to let go.

Note

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La Belle Dame Sans Mercy Speaks

No, I cannot lie down under the black lilacs
on the cool, dark grass;
I cannot lie down though my thighs ache
and the ache will last
and the moon comes in white slices
through the wood lattice.
If the moon hung there for a month,
if the lilacs bloomed
through April, through May,
through summer, cooling
the garden with spring perfume,
if finches came to your hand, suddenly tame,
I could not lie down, could not tell you my
name.

Lands

The men gather at the Baths,
watch Aeschylus and Euripides' dramas at the
theater.
The men gather at the mosque, at the chi
houses,
smoke nargihlas, listen to the blind story-
teller.
The men gather in the coffee houses, the
Mermaid Tavern
puff on that wicked weed from Virginia,
tell each other lies.
The women are islands at home, surrounded
by high walls,
quiet under veils or burkas, or overworked in
London's
drafty, damp stone houses. No man is an
island
but women are kept in circumscribed places
Pepys says, "my wife, poor wretch."
"Then the ship perished and she was cast on
an island
by a wave of the sea." The island of herself,
still,
there is "no lover like an island shore
for lingering embrace." For lingering
embraces
the girls spend their gold,
squander it, tossing handfuls of it before them
like petals for a bride's path. Slender foolish
things
that live a day, an hour... one supreme hour.
Their poor lives, "the arch of a crescent; so
many years
lead up to it, so many weary years decline."
They expect islands in the sun, dream of the
distant
Hebrides floating in veils of mist.
Later they hold new, starry strangers in their
arm
emptied of the miracles they have born,
yet still bedizened with the wonder of it.
Foreign to telescopes, alien to mathematics,
denied the alphabet, they go to sleep
and dream of untriangulated stars
Oh girls, women, mothers, did you ever
scheme
for oars, tillers, center boards? would you
have sewn your sheets into sails?
Would you have died for wings?
What do you whisper in the leaves and
grass?

Letter from Iphigenia in Heaven

After Father left, I wept. The palace was dull.
All the young men had gone with him,
and Mother was cross. When he sent for
me at Sounion, I was glad. I would have
gone
with him to Troy or to Egypt, or to the moon.
When I came into the camp all the soldiers
greeted me courteously, and then Father
lifted me up onto a flat stone, and I lay there,
afraid and wondering while the priests
muttered.
I whispered to Father, but he hushed me.
"Close your eyes," he said, but I looked
just as the silver knife descended.
Here I spend my days talking with Isaac.

The Mother of Icarus

If I had enough feathers, some good string
and pure beeswax, I could fashion wings,
to escape the wicked king of Crete,
fly over the walls of the labyrinth
over Peter Breugel's green sea
and great ship with bellied sails,
above the farmer keeping his eyes on the
shore
and the shepherd, nodding off in the warm
afternoon
I wouldn't let Icarus fly too close
to the sun, but keep him beside me,
I'd give him a lucky feather
so he would remember.

Mothers

How many are forgotten? How many in the
dust of the dead
who were the great thinkers or great artists,
but a village
in Armenia forgot them? a town in Kandahar
silenced them?
a priest denounced them in Lyon?
a farm in Nebraska laughed at them?
the mother forced them to be ladylike?
the father disowned them?
The violent tides of history swept away the
women in chitons, women in abayas,
women in crinoline, women in homespun.
They left the burial carpet,
the seamless garment of Galilee, the painted
China, the flying geese quilt,
no great marble pillars, no viral gods in stone,
no masterpieces hanging in the Louvre,
no soaring sonata for the prairie.
Their art blows on the wind, wind that goes
wherever it will
it carves the snowdrifts, ripens the peaches,
turns the blades
that lift the darkness of the towns, rearranges
the paintings
of the clouds, sings its own songs in its own
language.
It brushes the temple at Sounion,
the little mud brick houses in Afghanistan, the
Georgian facades at Bath,
the farm houses of Kansas.
Mothers, your dust flies on the wind and
whispers, "Do not forget me."
You are the apples and pears of my memory,
I am saying your names that I never knew,
pennies dropping from my lips.
I see you before the hearth,
in the birthing chair, sewing by the last light of
summer, your dreams
of longing tossing your sleep, and your
mornings lighting up like every morning,
tasting of iron.

Near the Way Station

"Your sins are forgiven you," Jesus said.
Frost said that you should forgive your old
self, also.
I regret the road not taken and the one taken.
They are equally cursed, equally blessed.
Let the waves wash in and the waves wash
out.
No one stops the tides, not Shakespeare, not
Homer.
"I had a good mind and I put it to poetry,
and that has been the wreck of me."
Men have time for regret.
Women are doing the dishes.
This is an appropriate arrangement.
The sex with the largest brain and largest feet
has the most regrets.
The poet said, "If you can be born once;
Why not again?" He was speaking of heaven.
The old preacher said, "I could not believe in
heaven
for myself, but there must be one for her."
He was speaking of the old woman,
still beautiful (and practical), whom he loved.
Coming to the destination, which may be only
a way station,
I am still confused, still trying to figure it out.
I know that love counts, friends count, beauty
counts, school counts.
Almost everything else is peripheral, although
this may be wrong or incomplete.

Night Tide

Sometimes at night
when the wind says it's the wind across the
dark ocean,
and the house seems to move on invisible
currents,
I remember it's built of hewn limestone,
shell deposits laid down during the Devonian
when Illinois was covered by a shallow sea
and trilobites scuttled the weedy bottom
and coral pipes wafted in waves.
Exhausted from the baby's crying,
I sprawl on the sheets, husband
snores gently, and baby's sobs subside
with a few sharp breaths.
Still the wind surges, the eternal cycle,
sleeping and waking, birth and death,
tide going in, coming out,
wind rises and falls into its secret cave
somewhere in the hidden centuries of shells
which keep their places in line,
have kept them a long time,
waiting for the next flood.

Noise, Fights, Shit

The preacher said, "Mrs. Noah nagged.
But Noah was drunk; the sons quarreling.
All the animals braying, barking, mooing,
meowing, screaming, trumpeting, baaing,
snorting, squeaking. Only the giraffes
were silent, and all of them pooping,
especially the elephants.
So who held things together?
Mrs. Noah!

Religious Reform

Why do the religious always start on women?
The Ayatollah wants to put us in black sacks
with only slits for our eyes.
The Pope wants to keep us pockets of
pregnancy
for the perpetuation of the faith,
no matter how our breasts droop,
our bellies sag, our veins break,
how hungry our children cry.
The fundamentalists would keep us at home,
forbid us to work for money,
forbid make-up which entices men.
If men are so morally weak, why not start on
men?
Why not abolish war?
Wipe out poverty?
Feed the starving?
Oh zealots, let your zeal burn for justice.
Rise up daughters of Deborah and prophesy.
Rise up Aunt Buddha.
Rise up Joan of Arc.
Rise up Messiah. Come as a woman.

Remembering Margie

Thirtieth Year Class Reunion

Everyone remembers Margie. How could we
forget
the girl famous for her escapades
in the back seat of Herb Mazvinski's Chevy.
He bragged about her gymnastics,
whether it was truth or lies
and everybody knew she drank beer with the
boys.
Margie tells us everything:
she's divorced thrice,
has joined AA, lives in Public Housing
in Portland.

We old girls sip our strawberry wine coolers
while Margie relates that she's taken up
quilting, bought a puppy, studies the Bible
with a circle of born-again ladies.

What can we say —
strangely disappointed —
she who was rebel for us all,
come finally to sobriety and piety
while we have been struggling all these years
toward Margie's wild nights.

She Who Cleans the World

In shallow basalt pools
where rivers spool into the sea,
the royal Princess Nausikaa and her maidens
stomp the soiled clothing, tread the royal linen
—

improvise a laundry dance, kick bare feet,
flick water on each other, sing silly songs,
spread robes and sheets to dry on golden
sands,
eat their picnic lunch: bread, olives, apricots,
make a game of spitting pits,
tease about their future suitors,
rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief,
goat herd, potter, prince or chief.
Then Odysseus appears, uncombed,
unshaven,
undressed, brine encrusted. The fearful girls
run off, except Nausikaa. A Royal must be
brave;

a girl must be careful. She loans him a king's
clean cloak;
the timid girls creep back.

Odysseus, anxious to present himself
to the king and queen, but the Princess
and her maidens fold the laundry first,
iron it with their little hands,
pack it in the pretty painted wagon.
The mules take their time back into the city
where Odysseus is hailed as hero.
I say that Odysseus made a big and bloody
mess

(and he wasn't reluctant to confess all his
great deeds),
but the real hero is the one who scrubs
the dirty laundry clean. She turns the globe on
its axis.

To a Child

Petal curled, water child,
You cannot know the earth is wild,
Wildly beautiful, and cruelly cold,
Jeweled with amethyst and fool's gold.
Begot in the blaze of an August moon
Now in May you knock at the womb.
Knock at the womb, knock at the world,
My unborn child, petal curled.

Who Would Have Been Called Robert

She felt despair
Heavy inside her belly
Like, a month ago
The overdue child,
Expelled blue and white
And dead. The rain riveted
The muddy yard. The rain
Was cold, so cold, my God,
And him so little,
In the ground.

When Passion Fades

When passion fades, its petals droop,
wither for no reason, what can I say? What
truth
or lie will be sufficient? I gather
logic, quotes from Freud to ease the hurt
but there is no ease when understanding
eludes me — and you slump, distraught,
wounded;
what is this shell we're left with — banded
nautilus, pearled, secret parts, convoluted,
a maze we can't escape? The Minotaur
is not the beast we fear. It is absence,
hollowness, the taste of the burnover
in the mouth, dryness in the lungs — the
wrench
from Paradise. What evil sword drove us out?
And where to begin again, north or south?